

Multiple Mode Switching Regulator Having An Automatic Sensor Circuit for Power Reduction

5 Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to switching regulators, and, more particularly, to a multiple-mode switching regulator having an automatic sensor circuit that places the switching regulator in a low power mode.

10 Background of the Invention

Switching regulators are used to provide a constant supply of voltage to the circuitry within prescribed voltage tolerances. They are often used in portable electronic devices that have lower power requirements where the input voltage is supplied by a power source, such as a battery, that may fluctuate overtime due to contact corrosion, dissipation, temperature or other external environment conditions or changes thereof. The switching regulator receives the input voltage from the power source and converts it to a voltage within the prescribed voltage tolerance. Thereby, the switching regulator provides a regulated output voltage to a load from an unregulated input voltage. Specifically, the switching regulator provides and maintains a predetermined output voltage to a portable electronic device circuitry coupled thereto. As such, circuitry incorporated within the switching regulator regulates the voltage to within prescribed voltage tolerances of the device circuitry even in the presence of wide deviations in the power source voltage.

The switching regulator may be used to convert a power source signal to a higher or lower controlled voltage output. A control circuit for generating pulse width modulation within the switching regulator functions as an oscillator which provides a periodic carrier signal. By rapidly opening and closing a switch within the switching regulator, the control circuit controls the average power that is provided to a load coupled to the switching regulator by controlling the average voltage applied to the load.

A typical switching regulator has at least two switches that switch ON and OFF out of phase with each other to supply current to a load. Three types of switching regulators include: buck mode switching regulators, which regulate an output voltage that is lower than the input voltage; boost mode regulators, which regulate an output voltage that is higher than the input voltage; and buck-boost mode switching regulators, which regulate an output voltage that is higher, lower, or the same as the input voltage. These three modes can be combined to form a multiple mode switching regulator.

A typical multiple mode switching regulator includes an inductor with a first end coupled to both a first high side switch, a first low side switch, and a second end coupled to both a second high side switch and a second low side switch. The first high side switch and first low side switch are on the input side. The second high side switch and second low side switch are on the output side. In buck mode, the first high side switch and first low side switch are switched ON and OFF out of phase with each other. In boost mode, the second high side switch and second low side switch are switched ON and OFF out of phase with each other. In buck-boost mode, the first high side switch and the second low side switch are switched ON and OFF in phase with each other, and the second high side switch and the first low side switch are switched ON and OFF in phase with each other, but out of phase with the first high side switch and second low side switch.

Advantageously, switching regulators are often used in electronic devices because of their greatly increased efficiency at higher loads. This increase in efficiency presents a substantial advantage for battery powered devices. The efficiency, however, is reduced greatly when a minimal current load is present. As a solution, a switching regulator may include a low power mode to increase the efficiency when the load current has fallen below a certain predetermined threshold. During the low power mode, various blocks within the regulator are turned off and a simpler control loop may be employed. Unfortunately, the simpler control loop decreases regulation tolerance.

Most switching regulators do not implement a low power mode that maintains a supply of regulated output voltage. Many switching regulators that include a low power mode do not automatically sense the output current in an effort to make a determination of whether the low power mode should be entered or exited from.

5 Furthermore, many of these switching regulators require a low power mode input signal to initiate the low power mode. There, however, are a few switching regulators that sense the output current and provide a feature of automatic entrance and exit from a low power mode. Unfortunately, these switching regulators require an expensive precision resistor or a current transformer to sense current.

10 Thus, a need exists for a switching regulator having a low power mode that automatically senses when this mode should be initiated without the use of expensive external components nor an extensive amount of external components.

Summary of the Invention

To address the above-discussed deficiencies of switching regulators, the present invention teaches a switching regulator having a low power control circuit that automatically senses when the low power mode should be initiated without the use of expensive external components nor an extensive amount of external components. The switching regulator in accordance with the present invention includes a driver coupled to receive a first high side reference voltage. An input switching device includes a control node that connects to the driver and a drain node that receives an input voltage. A diode couples between the source node of the input switching device and ground. A first end of an inductor connects to the node formed between the source node of the input switching device and the diode. A first output switching device includes a drain node connected to the second end of the inductor and a control node connected to a high side output node. A second output switching device includes a drain node connected to the second end of the inductor and a control node connected to a low side output node. An output load connects to the source nodes of the first and second output switching devices. A low power control circuit couples across the inductor to monitor the current across the output load and automatically initiate the low power mode of the switching regulator independent of the value of the output load and the input voltage.

The low power control circuit includes a low power switching device that includes a control node connected to the high side output node and a drain node connected to the second end of the inductor. An amplifier connects to the source node of the low power switching device and the first output switching device. A first current mirror couples to the amplifier to mirror the difference between the output current through the output load and the current supplied at the second end of the inductor. A second current mirror couples to the first current mirror to mirror the current difference through a current source and a capacitor connected in parallel across the current source. A comparator compares the voltage generated by the capacitor with a predetermined voltage source. A first and second AND gate couples to the comparator. A first and second counter couple to the first and second AND gates respectively. The output of the first counter supplies a low power

mode entry signal that initiates the low power mode for the switching regulator. The second AND gate couples to receive this low power mode entry signal. The output of the second counter supplies a low power mode exit signal that indicates when the switching regulator is not in low power mode. The first AND gate couples to receive
5 this low power mode exit signal.

Advantages of this design include but are not limited to a switching regulator that automatically enters into a low power mode without the requirement of an external signal. The switching regulator in accordance with the present invention does not require an expensive precision resistor coupled to the output to sense
10 output current; nor does it require an additional feedback pin from the resistor. This embodiment does implement the use of an additional capacitor; yet, this capacitor can be a standard ceramic type with no special requirements. In addition, the capacitor's value can vary widely without altering the performance of the switching regulator. This embodiment is also independent of input voltage, duty cycle, and
15 most importantly output capacitance.

These and other features and advantages of the present invention will be understood upon consideration of the following detailed description of the invention and the accompanying drawings.

Brief Description of the Drawings

For a more complete understanding of the present invention and the advantages thereof, reference is now made to the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which like reference numbers indicate like features and wherein:

Figure 1 illustrates a known switching regulator;

Figure 2 illustrates a switching regulator in accordance with the present invention;

Figures 3 displays the timing diagram of the switching node, the output current, the output voltage, the low power capacitance node, and the low power mode signal of the switching regulator shown in Figure 2 for entrance and exit from the low power mode;

Figures 4 shows the timing diagram of the switching node, the output current, the output voltage, the low power capacitance node, and the low power mode signal of the switching regulator shown in Figure 2 for entrance into the low power mode; and

Figure 5 displays the timing diagram of the switching node, the output current, the output voltage, the low power capacitance node, and the low power mode signal of the switching regulator shown in Figure 2 for exiting out of the low power mode.

Detailed Description of Preferred Embodiments

The present invention will now be described more fully hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which embodiments of the invention are shown. This invention may, however, be embodied in many different forms and
5 should not be construed as limited to the embodiments set forth herein. Rather, these embodiments are provided so that this disclosure will be thorough and complete, and will fully convey the scope of the invention to those skilled in the art.

The present invention is best understood by comparison with the prior art. Hence, this detailed description begins with a discussion of known switching
10 regulator shown in Figure 1 and the switching regulator disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 6,650,100B1 entitled "Bootstrap Technique For A Multiple Mode Switching Regulator" which is incorporated herein.

Figure 1 illustrates a known switching regulator 10 that includes a circuit driver D_1 , an input switching device T_1 , a diode D_0 , an inductor L_1 , a first output
15 switching device T_3 , a second output switching device T_2 , an output capacitor C_{out1} , and an output resistive load R_{load1} .

As stated previously, a typical multiple mode switching regulator includes an inductor with a first end coupled to both a first high side switch, a first low side switch, and a second end coupled to both a second high side switch and a second
20 low side switch. The first high side switch and first low side switch are on the input side. The second high side switch and second low side switch are on the output side. In buck mode, the first high side switch and first low side switch are switched ON and OFF out of phase with each other. In boost mode, the second high side switch and second low side switch are switched ON and OFF out of phase with each
25 other. In buck-boost mode, the first high side switch and the second low side switch are switched ON and OFF in phase with each other, and the second high side switch and the first low side switch are switched ON and OFF in phase with each other, but out of phase with the first high side switch and second low side switch.

This circuit shown in Figure 1, however, differs in design from the
30 conventional switching regulator disclosed previously in that there is only one high

side input switch T_1 , whereas diode D_0 performs the function of the first low side input switch.

As shown, an input voltage V_{in1} is supplied to the drain node of input switching device T_1 . The circuit driver D_1 connects to receive a high side input HSL₁. The output of circuit driver D_1 connects to the control node of input switching device T_1 . The inductor L_1 couples between the source of the input switching device T_1 and the drain of the second output switching device T_2 , while the source of second output switching device T_2 couples to ground. The drain of the first output switching device T_3 couples to inductor L_1 . A high side output HSL₂ coupled to the control node of the first output switching device T_3 , while a low side output LSL₁ couples to the control node of the second output switching device T_2 . Capacitor C_{out1} and resistor R_{load1} couple in parallel across the source node of first output switching device T_3 and ground.

In operation, during buck mode, the input switching device T_1 is switched ON and OFF, while second output switching device T_2 is off completely and first output switching device T_3 is always on. When the input switching device T_1 turns off, node A_1 decreases to a voltage corresponding to diode D_0 below ground (-0.7V). The current builds in inductor L_1 because the current for the driver D_1 is higher than the output voltage, V_{out} .

In boost mode, the first output switching device T_3 and the second output switching device T_2 are switched ON and OFF out of phase with each other.

In buck-boost mode, the input switching device T_1 and the second output switching device T_2 are switched ON and OFF in phase with each other, and the first output switching device T_3 is switched ON and OFF out of phase with the input switching device T_1 and second output switching device T_2 .

As shown in Figure 2, a switching regulator 100 in accordance with the present invention includes a circuit driver D_2 , an input switching device T_4 , a diode D_3 , an inductor L_2 , a first output switching device T_6 , a second output switching device T_5 , an output capacitor C_{out2} , an output resistive load R_{load2} , and low power control circuit 50. Low power control circuit includes a switching device T_7 , an

amplifier 10, a first current mirror 30, a second current mirror 32, a current source I_1 , a capacitor C_1 , a comparator 20, a first AND gate 22, a second AND gate 24, a first counter 26, and a second counter 28.

Switching regulator 100 uses an external capacitor C_{out2} and the internal
 5 sense FETs, T_6 and T_7 , to determine the load current under any condition. Once the load current is sensed, the control circuit 50 within switching regulator 100 generates a signal that initiates entry into the low power mode LP_{enter} or exit therefrom LP_{exit} . In addition, the switching device T_7 in the present invention is a sense FET. Conventional switching regulators do not use a sense FET as a second
 10 high side switching device as switching device T_7 has been implemented in this design. Most conventional switching regulators are designed to implement the use of an external sense resistor or a transformer.

As shown, an input voltage V_{in2} is supplied to the drain node of input switching device T_4 . The circuit driver D_2 connects to receive a high side input
 15 HSL₃. The output of circuit driver D_2 connects to the control node of input switching device T_4 . The inductor L_2 couples between the source of the input switching device T_4 and the drain of the second output switching device T_5 , while the source of second output switching device T_5 couples to ground. The drain of the first output switching device T_6 couples to inductor L_2 . A high side output HSL₄ coupled to the
 20 control node of the first output switching device T_6 , while a low side output LSL₂ couples to the control node of the second output switching device T_5 . Capacitor C_{out2} and resistor R_{load2} couple in parallel across the source node of first output switching device T_6 and ground.

Low power control circuit 50 includes sense switching device T_7 which
 25 connects to amplifier 10. Specifically, the drain node of sense switching device T_7 connects to the second end of inductor L_2 , the control node couples to the high side output HSL₄, the source node couples to amplifier 10. Sense FET T_7 senses current in both the normal operating mode and the low power mode. Those skilled in the art may recognize that sense FET T_7 may be replaced with a similar switching
 30 device. Once the load current is sensed, given the value of capacitor C_1 is known,

the average output current can be derived, even without continuous current through the FET T_6 .

Current mirror 30 couples between amplifier 10 and second current mirror 32. Current mirror 32 connects to current source I_1 . Capacitor C_1 couples across current source I_1 . Sensing FET T_6 senses the current when the switching regulator goes into low power mode. Sense FET T_7 integrates the current with that processed through sense FET T_6 . The resultant signal is amplified and mirrored into capacitor C_1 . Current i_2 pulls a constant current out of capacitor C_1 , while sense FET T_6 adds current i_1 into the capacitor C_1 .

Comparator 20 couples to receive a voltage that is twice the value of the reference voltage V_{ref} and the voltage at node C_{LP} . Effectively, comparator C_1 compares the voltage generated by the capacitor with this predetermined voltage. A first and second AND gate, 22 and 24, couples to comparator C_1 . A first and second counter, 26 and 28, couple to the first and second AND gates, 22 and 24, respectively. The output of the first counter 26 supplies a low power mode entry signal LP_{enter} that initiates the low power mode for the switching regulator 100. The second AND gate 24 couples to receive this low power mode entry signal LP_{enter} . The output of the second counter 28 supplies a low power mode exit signal LP_{exit} that indicates when the switching regulator 100 is not in low power mode. The first AND gate 22 couples to receive this low power mode exit signal LP_{exit} .

Specifically, comparator 20 compares the voltage across current source I_1 with the value of two times the reference voltage V_{ref} . As shown, current i_1 is the current that enters node C_{LP} and current i_2 is the current provided by current source I_1 . When current i_1 becomes less than current i_2 , comparator 20 will generate a signal LP_{enter} that signifies that switching regulator 100 may enter low power mode, wherein signal LP_{enter} will be "high". Counter 26 is a five bit counter that determines that switching regulator 100 will enter into low power mode after the signal is available over 32 cycles.

Switching regulator 100 functions as the following during the normal mode of operation. During buck mode, the input switching device T_4 is switched ON and

OFF, while second output switching device T_5 is off completely and first output switching device T_6 is always on. When the input switching device T_4 turns off, node A decreases to a voltage corresponding to diode D_0 below ground ($-0.7V$). The current builds in inductor L_2 because the current for the driver D_1 is higher than the

5 output voltage, V_{out} .

Switching device T_4 turns on for a short period of time. The load current is discontinuous. It is only constant during the on period of the switch T_4 . When switching device T_4 on, it integrates current into the capacitor C_1 through current i_1 .

When switching device T_4 is high, switching device T_6 is on. Thereby, current

10 flows through the inductor L_1 which produces a triangle wave. At the same time, switching device T_7 is on and senses the load current. Amplifier 10 mirrors the difference between the current sensed by sense switching device, T_7 and T_6 , using current mirror 30 implemented by transistors, 12 and 14. The current through current mirror 30 is further mirrored by current mirror 32 implemented by 16 and 18

15 to provide current i_1 which is proportional to the load current.

During the determination of whether the switching regulator 100 should enter the enter low power mode, it is assumed that the voltage on the C_{LP} pin is above twice the reference voltage V_{ref} , since it is pulled high during the startup of the device. In any of the operating modes, the average output amplifier and the

20 external capacitor. If the average current is less than the current of the trimmed current source I_2 , the voltage at node C_{LP} will start to decrease. Once the voltage drops below twice the reference voltage V_{ref} , the comparator signals the LPModeSignal which goes into a 5-bit up counter. If 32 consecutive LPMode signals are received, then the part enters low power mode. This works for all

25 modes, buck, boost, and buck-boost, since the average output current is always delivered through the T_4 FET. An example of entering low power mode is shown in Fig. 4.

Regarding exiting low power mode, most of the control loop circuitry and switching of the main power FETs are turned off until needed when the switching

30 regulator is in low power mode. The switching frequency is then dependent upon

the output load R_{load2} and the output capacitance C_{out2} , with a hysteric operation determined by the comparators of the output voltage. When this is occurring, the current through switching device T_6 is discontinuous, with the output current supplied by the charge on the large output capacitor C_{out2} . To sense output current

5 during this case, a ratio of the output charge placed on the output capacitor C_{out2} is placed on capacitor C_1 and slowly bled off by a fixed internal current source I_1 . If the charge placed on capacitor C_1 is less than the fixed internal sources time/current relationship, then the output current is less than the threshold, and switching regulator 100 stays in low power mode. If the charge increases above the internal

10 current source threshold for two consecutive cycles, switching regulator 100 exits low power mode and runs at the standard fixed switching frequency.

Specifically, when current i_1 becomes greater than current i_2 , comparator 20 will generate a signal that signifies that the switching regulator may exit low power mode. Counter 28 is a two bit counter that determines if the charge increases

15 above the internal current source threshold for at least two consecutive cycles. When the charge is above the internal current source threshold for at least two consecutive cycles, the switching regulator 100 exits low power mode and runs at the standard fixed switching frequency. An example of this operation is shown in Fig. 5.

20 In boost mode and buck-boost mode, switching regulator will function similar to that of buck mode with the following exceptions. Specifically, in boost mode, the first output switching device T_6 and the second output switching device T_5 are switched ON and OFF out of phase with each other. In buck-boost mode, the input switching device T_4 and the second output switching device T_5 are switched ON and

25 OFF in phase with each other, and the first output switching device T_6 is switched ON and OFF out of phase with the input switching device T_4 and second output switching device T_5 .

If node C_{LP} is pulled low through an external source, such as a microprocessor, the part will go into low power mode after 32 cycles have elapsed.

30 When pulled high, it will exit low power mode after two cycles. The currents of the

sources are low enough, on the order of tens of micro amps, that the external source is not required to be strong to overdrive the control currents.

Those of skill in the art will recognize that the physical location of the elements illustrated in Figure 2 can be moved or relocated while retaining the function described above. For example, diode D_3 may be implemented with a low side input switching device coupled to a driver, wherein the driver couples to a low side input node.

Furthermore, those skilled in the art will recognize that counters, 26 and 28, merely provide a "wait state" for the switching regulator, wherein the switching regulator waits for a predetermined amount of time after having received low power condition prior to entry into the low power mode. Thereby, an alternate embodiment may remove counters, 26 and 28, and still provide a switching regulator having a control circuit that automatically determines when the switching regulator should enter and exit low power mode.

Figure 3 displays the timing diagram of the switching node, the output current, the output voltage, the low power capacitance node, and the low power mode signal of the switching regulator shown in Figure 2 for entrance and exit from the low power mode. As shown when the switching regulator is in low power mode and the output current increases above a particular threshold, the switching regulator exits low power mode.

Figure 4 illustrates a timing diagram of specific signals and nodes of the switching regulator just prior to entry into a low power mode and after entry into a low power mode. As shown, switching node A_2 switches from -1 volt to 9 volts. Although hard to distinguish with the naked eye, the output current and voltage decrease as time increases. The voltage at node C_{LP} consistently decreases as well. When the output voltage reaches the threshold of being less than twice the reference voltage V_{ref} , then the low power mode signal is generated as shown. This signals duration lasts for 32 cycles and then the switching regulator enters into low power mode.

Figure 5 displays the timing diagram of the switching node, the output current, the output voltage, the low power capacitance node, and the low power mode signal of the switching regulator shown in Figure 2 for exiting out of the low power mode. As shown in Figure 5, when the switching device T_4 is on, as indicated
5 by switching node A_2 , the voltage at node C_{LP} rises. This is a direct result of the increase of current i_1 . When switching device T_4 turns off, the voltage at node C_{LP} decreases in value since current i_2 subtracts from that which is supplied at node C_{LP} .

Advantages of this design include but are not limited to a switching regulator having a control circuit that automatically determines when the switching regulator
10 will enter or exit a low power mode without the requirement for an external signal. It does not require an expensive precision resistor on the output to sense output current, as well as an additional feedback pin from the resistor. It does require an additional capacitor, however, this capacitor can be a standard ceramic type with no special requirements. Its value can vary widely and the system will still work
15 correctly. It is also independent of input voltage, duty cycle, and most importantly output capacitance.

Since entrance and exit from the low power mode occurs automatically with a separate external capacitor C_1 that is independent from the output capacitor C_{out2} nor the input voltage, this circuit will work with any value of an output capacitor or
20 any input voltage without affecting the point where the switching regulator exits or enters the low power mode. Most known switching regulators point of entry or exit into and out of the low power mode, however, are effected by the value of the external capacitor or output voltage. For example, if the external capacitor is altered, the current required for the switching regulator to enter or exit the low power
25 mode will be changed. Furthermore, in conventional switching regulators, if the voltage of the input driver changes, the point that the switching regulator enters or exits low power mode will change.

The reader's attention is directed to all papers and documents which are filed concurrently with this specification and which are open to public inspection with this

specification, and the contents of all such papers and documents are incorporated herein by reference.

5 All the features disclosed in this specification (including any accompany claims, abstract and drawings) may be replaced by alternative features serving the same, equivalent or similar purpose, unless expressly stated otherwise. Thus, unless expressly stated otherwise, each feature disclosed is one example only of a generic series of equivalent or similar features.

10 The terms and expressions which have been employed in the foregoing specification are used therein as terms of description and not of limitation, and there is no intention in the use of such terms and expressions of excluding equivalents of the features shown and described or portions thereof, it being recognized that the scope of the invention is defined and limited only by the claims which follow.